

U.S. AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICERS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF
EDUCATION AND TRAINING

By

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I thank my family for patience and understanding when things were not going smoothly, which happened to be quite often. I also thank my committee for taking the time to help me through this journey. Finally, I thank all the faculty and staff of the College of Journalism and Communications for their efforts in making the program at the University of Florida one of which we can be proud.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
 CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Excellent Public Relations	6
PR as a Profession	8
Training Studies	10
Cost Versus Benefit of Training.....	11
International Context	12
Research Question	14
3 U.S. AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS.....	16
Education and Training.....	17
Public Affairs Versus Public Relations	20
4 METHODOLOGY	26
Sample	26
Participants.....	27
Data Collection.....	27
Data Analysis	30
5 FINDINGS	31
Theme 1: Education.....	32
Theme 2: Roles.....	37

	Theme 3: Differences Between Public Affairs and Public Relations.....	42
	Emergent Themes: Rank and Crises.....	46
6	SUMMARY	50
	Implications.....	50
	Conclusion	53
	LIST OF REFERENCES.....	56
	BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	60

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>page</u>
3.1. Bachelor's Degree Majors.....	17
3.2. Master's Degree Majors.....	18
4.1. List of Participants' Qualifications.....	27

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the formal and nontraditional educational experiences by a group of Air Force public affairs officers and the value those practitioners place on their learning experiences. Also, this research explores how those officers view their career field in comparison with the larger concept of public relations. Analysis of interview data indicated participants perceived military public affairs officer training and on-the-job experience as the most effective elements for professional development. Additionally, participants related that they valued an education that provides practitioners an understanding of the fundamentals of communication. From a theoretical perspective, this study suggests specialized practice within public relations presents variables that should be considered when developing a standardized public relations curriculum for undergraduate degree programs.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 500 commissioned officers of the United States Air Force who serve as public affairs officers.¹ All have bachelor's degrees and many have advanced degrees of some kind. These officers collectively are responsible for communicating the Air Force story and maintaining relationships with internal and external publics worldwide. While Air Force public affairs officers all have formal military training in public affairs, the amount and type of their civilian education in public relations varies. The degree to which this variance impacts their ability to execute the tasks assigned to them is an area that has not been specifically explored in the literature.

Some Air Force specialties require a specific degree for an officer to enter a technical or professional field (AFPC, 2005b). There are some career fields such as engineering, space and missile officers, pilots and navigators which rely military training instead of civilian education for proficiency. Other specialties – such as public affairs – allow for officers to acquire basic skills through civilian education since the jobs have essentially the same requirements. Public relations,² or public affairs as it is called in

¹ For this study, only active duty Air Force officers are included. The researcher recognizes there are Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard public affairs officers who are integrated into the overall Air Force public affairs mission. Additionally, the researcher recognizes the Army and Navy public affairs career fields share some common characteristics with the Air Force.

² For the purpose of this paper, public affairs will be used to identify the Air Force career field and public relations will be used to indicate civilian practices. Some of the reasons for the use of “public affairs” in government organizations are discussed in Chapter 3.

most government organizations, is included in the list of specialties that do not require specific civilian education; however, all officers must have at least a bachelor's degree prior to being commissioned in the service. Air Force officers serving in professional specialties, such as lawyers, doctors, dentists and nurses, require civilian licensing and education.

Air Force public affairs officers receive basic technical skills training through an in-house school, the Defense Information School. While some officers do have degrees in mass communication, it is neither a requirement nor a common scenario (AFPC, 2005a). Furthermore, a select number of officers are sent to universities to obtain master's degrees in mass communication-related fields after having served in the public affairs career field for three or more years.

Research on education in public relations has been associated with the effort by educators and professional organizations to grow the field into a recognized profession (Pieccka, 2000). The focus of this research is to explore how Air Force public affairs practitioners gain knowledge and experience through both traditional education in a university and nontraditional education such as military schools and on-the job training. A special emphasis will be placed on exploring education and experiences that contribute to the development of a public affairs officer. The information could be useful to further refine both the Air Force's public affairs education process and the public relations field's nontraditional approaches to education that help develop professional, experienced practitioners.

Since the majority of Air Force public affairs officers do not have undergraduate or graduate degrees in mass communication or public relations (AFPC, 2005a), an

opportunity exists to explore nontraditional ways to develop competencies ranging from technical to managerial levels. This research represents a first step in that process: exploring how Air Force public affairs practitioners perceive the development of their technical and managerial public relations skills through traditional and nontraditional methods.

Contemporary research on the government practice of public relations is generally sparse. Recent research has tended to concentrate on the civilian practitioner while the government practice of public relations has been mostly described as public information, one-way communication and propaganda (L. A. Grunig *et al.*, 2002). While government agencies have a responsibility to be transparent to various extents, the possibility exists that outdated models of practice will change, or have changed, with time. A senior Air Force commander recently asked public affairs leadership if the “existing [public affairs] career development system provide sufficient ‘widening’ of experience/perspective to produce ‘strategic communicators?’” (McKenna, 2004). Air Force public affairs leadership’s answer was that the current system did not deliberately prepare officers to fulfill that role. They also stated the public affairs career field has recognized the need to develop officers who can do more than communicate messages, recognizing the need to develop officers who can approach the job strategically. Given that it may be impractical for the Air Force to require a specialized degree for public affairs officers, encouraging graduate studies in public relations or mass communication, to complement other training opportunities, could be a step in the right direction.

The role of the military public affairs practitioner has not gone unnoticed. The Public Relations Society of America, for example, has recognized the importance of the

military practitioner by developing a professional interest section for military and public safety organizations (PRSA, n.d.). Approximately 400 Air Force public affairs officers are practicing in the United States, while about 100 are stationed overseas. The demographic makeup of the field is almost even with respect to gender, while the Air Force as a whole is 80 percent men and 20 percent women (McKenna, 2004).

The mission of the public affairs function is stated in Air Force Instruction 35-101 (Instruction, 2001) as “Expanding awareness of and support for the world’s most respected aerospace force” (p. 22). To accomplish that mission with “excellence,” the service created seven goals (p. 23):

- Improve the effectiveness of Air Force Public Affairs communication.
- Provide effective leadership, guidance and support to the field.
- Increase the combat readiness of the career field.
- Provide timely security and policy review of text and imagery.
- Provide customers on-demand service.
- Increase the exposure of the Air Force bands.
- Provide greater joint audience customer satisfaction.

The mission and goals focus heavily on information dissemination without particular emphasis on relationships with publics. Crisis management and crisis communication, however, are as important to the Air Force public affairs officer as they are to her counterpart in the civilian sector. Indeed, the nature of aviation itself presents inherent scenarios where Air Force public affairs officers are likely to experience crisis situations. Combine the mission of flying with the issues that arise in an organization with 350,000 men and women, and it is understandable that crises are going to occur

somewhere within the organization. Part of this research will focus on the efforts to plan and train for crisis response, a situation that gives the public affairs officer an opportunity to learn while the media's cameras are not rolling. Further, the actions of the Air Force affect communities across the globe, requiring relationships to be established and maintained with international audiences as well.

Taking into account the complexities of practicing public relations in such a diverse organization, the researcher will explore how practitioners are prepared to meet the challenges they face and what education and experiences they draw on to get it done. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the formal and nontraditional educational experiences by a group of Air Force public affairs officers and the value those practitioners place on their learning experiences.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This qualitative study is not framed by any single theory; rather, the study is intended to draw from research addressing issues for public relations practitioner development. Those areas include education, professionalism, international public relations, and employee training. Education is looked at from the standpoints of what should be taught and the potential impact of knowledge of the public relations field. Professionalism addresses how public relations is viewed by other functions in the organization. Research on international public relations is included due to the worldwide nature of military service. Finally, training is addressed as a generic concern that is essential to employees in any career field.

Excellent Public Relations

While there is not likely to be a causal relationship that would show a person's education is the key ingredient for performance, research suggests a public relations education leads to factors that pave the way to success in the profession. L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) linked education to the factors that tended to allow public relations practitioners more access to the dominant coalition. Other factors were experience and professionalism. The "Excellence study" (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) attempted to isolate characteristics of excellent organization. Those factors include participative culture, organic structures, symmetrical communications systems, and high job satisfaction. The study's results, however, did not show those factors were necessarily indicators of the public relations function being excellent. The results did

show that public relations tended to be excellent when the senior public relations practitioner was in the dominant coalition and he or she participated in the organization's strategic management. L. Grunig et al. (2002) described the dominant coalition as Stevenson et al. (1985) defined it: "an interacting group of individuals, deliberately constructed, independent of the formal structure, lacking its own internal formal structure, consisting of mutually perceived membership, issue oriented, focused on a goal or goals external to the coalition, and requiring concerted member action" (p. 251). Therefore, a case could be made that there is a link between the importance of education for public relations practitioners and the potential for practitioners to make their organizations excellent.

The International Public Relations Association published a report that suggested a coordinated effort to develop public relations education (IPRA, 1990). The study provided recommendations for a public relations education at the graduate level following undergraduate studies in general liberal education, which was standard in some recognized professions. The justification for that recommendation also centered on the shortage of established public relations programs and qualified educators. Later the Commission on Public Relations Education Report (Commission, 1999) recommended education criteria for undergraduate and graduate studies to prepare public relations students to handle the demands of the profession. The intended result was to provide direction for teachers and students of public relations (Commission, 1999). The commission outlined skills and knowledge it considered necessary for undergraduates to achieve in order to develop into a competent professional in public relations. While the IPRA study is listed as research considered for the commission's report, the

recommendations of the 1990 report were essentially excluded. Furthermore, the 1999 commission made a statement to those students who might choose to major in a specialty other than public relations: “a minor in public relations is not sufficient to prepare a student for the professional practice of public relations” (n.p.).

Public relations scholars and practitioners have worked to define the field, document its history and build theory. Wimmer and Dominick (2003) wrote that public relations “tends to be the most self-analytical” of the mass communication fields (p. 381). This self-analysis has led the field to develop numerous definitions of public relations, many models of communication, and a variety models depicting public relations campaigns (Cutlip *et al.*, 2000). The field’s largest professional organization and accrediting agency, Public Relations Society of America, states that its main objective is “to advance the standards of the public relations profession and to provide members with professional development opportunities through continuing education programs, information exchange forums and research projects conducted on the national and local levels” (PRSA, n.d.).

PR as a Profession

Perhaps the silver bullet for the public relations field would be to create a formula for educating someone to be a public relations technician and develop him or her into a consummate public relations management professional. The difficulty, however, is at least twofold. First, as we have seen, there is no clear consensus on whether public relations is or ought to be a profession in the first place, and if it should, what the qualifiers should be. Second, and more important for this research, the literature is somewhat lacking on the education front.

Discussion of formal public relations education does surface in the area of defining the field as a profession and as a strategic management function. The field faces a challenge meeting that professional and managerial expectation if its practitioners are not educated or trained sufficiently to advance past the technician role (Rawel, 2002). Wylie (1994) included “completion of a generalized and prescribed course of graduate study” as one of four criteria for recognizing a field as a profession. Practitioners in a study by Cameron et al. (1996) indicated education is a key element in developing professional standards in public relations. In studying the “ideal” program of study for graduate students in public relations, Hon, Fitzpatrick and Hall (2004) suggested a dual-focused curriculum to address the needs of students and employers. The two approaches are identified as practical and theoretical. Since the impetus for defining an appropriate curriculum for public relations seems to be largely driven by the desire to attain professional status, it might be logical to cover what the most recent recommendations are for educating public relations practitioners.

The Commission on Public Relations Education (1999) recommended areas for undergraduate education: communication and persuasion concepts and strategies, communication and public relations theories, relationships and relationship building, societal trends, ethical issues, legal requirements and issues, marketing and finance, public relations history, uses of research and forecasting, multicultural and global issues, organizational change and development, and management concepts and theories. The Commission’s recommendations for graduate study are “advanced knowledge and understanding of the body of knowledge in public relations as well as theory, research, communication processes, planning, production and advanced

communications management abilities.” It might be a leap, however, to expect that a public relations education alone would prepare a practitioner to handle the rigors of strategically managing and leading a public relations staff. Thus, a look at the literature on developing employees seems appropriate.

Training Studies

Training in this review is limited to that which occurs outside the purview of traditional university-level education. Human resource management literature (Garavan, 1997) defines training as “a planned and systematic effort to modify or develop knowledge, skills and attitudes through learning experiences to achieve effective performance in an activity or a range of activities” (p. 40). Garavan (1997) distinguishes between training in a specific skill that has transfer value and training on company-specific procedures and policies. Also, training is a function of learning, which includes both education and development.

Hunt (1980) defined training as “teaching members of an organization information and skills they can use in their jobs” (p. 303). He stated on-the-job-training is an acceptable method for entry-level employees working in jobs that require “little skill” (p. 311). That description contradicts the notion that on-the-job-training can be a beneficial tool as both an indoctrination and continuing education process made necessary by the dynamic nature of organizations

Training is affected by technology and change, which has prompted researchers Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) to explore new approaches “including action learning, just-in time training, mentoring, coaching, organizational learning, and managing skill portfolios” (p. 472). The task of keeping up with emerging practices adds new emphasis to the importance of training. Longenecker and Simonetti (2005) suggest organizations

“provide ongoing training and education for your people” as one of the “Five Absolutes for high performance” (p. 482). To survive in the competitive business world, organizations are pushing employees to be more productive and versatile (Garavan, 1997). “Employees are being asked to do more in less time and many are required to acquire totally new competences” (p. 48). Training may have macro-level benefits for corporations, as well.

Training employees is recognized as a means to ensure a company’s competitiveness (Garavan, 1997). Tying productivity to training allows organizations to focus on producing a more knowledgeable workforce capable of competing in the growing global economy (Egan, 2004).

The past 30 years have also witnessed tremendous growth and improvement in training research. As Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) point out:

Now, as recent reviews have documented, training-related theories abound...there is also more empirical training-related research going on—in the field as well as in the lab—than ever before. Researchers are adopting a systems view of training and are more concerned with the organizational context. There are new models, constructs (e.g., opportunity to perform), and influences (e.g., technology) in the reported research. The field can now offer sound, pedagogically based principles and guidelines to practitioners and instructional developers. (p. 473)

While the importance of providing training is stressed in the literature above, the reality is that employers do not always take the time to develop employees. Pfeffer (2005) asserts that training “is talked about more often than done” (p. 176). It should not be a surprise that researchers are searching to describe the importance of training in terms people in business can understand – how it affects the bottom line.

Cost Versus Benefit of Training

Employee training, much like public relations efforts, is not so easy to measure in terms of a dollar value added to profitability. Training is also an area subject to the

budget ax when companies are not doing well financially (Pfeffer, 2004). “Training is often seen as a frill in many U.S. organizations, something to be reduced to make profit goals in times of economic stringency” (p. 160). L. Grunig et al. (2002) embarked on an extensive research project designed to put a value on what a public relations function adds to an organization. In that study, researchers addressed the education and training of public relations practitioners and how skills translate to the potential for excellence in an organization. Egan et al. (2004) similarly drew a parallel to learning as a value-added function: “It has been theorized that systematic approaches to learning in organizations are tied to corporate performance and survival and therefore of value” (p. 281).

International Context

Public relations practitioners are expected to perform a variety of functions – including media relations, internal communication and community relations—all of which take on a new dimension when the practitioner is placed in an international setting. Assuming a public relations practitioner has mastered the skills necessary to serve in a management function, the circumstances change if the practitioner is thrust into an organization in a country outside his or her own. Government agencies and a growing number of multinational corporations require public relations practitioners to practice overseas. Barriers such as language, culture and religion could become problematic if public relations practitioners are not prepared for working abroad. For example, De Beer and Merrill (2004) point out that responding to a crisis in another country can lead to misunderstanding based on communication and cultural barriers. An example the authors provided involved a Japanese-owned company that sent a Japanese representative to the United States to apologize for the Bridgestone-Firestone tire crisis. When his efforts failed to achieve results, an American representative replaced him. The authors suggested

“handling crises and campaigns in a global environment requires culturally astute, careful, and committed practitioners” (p. 95).

Recent international public relations research has focused on developing theory and describing the practice within countries and attempted to define it on a global scale. Practicing public relations in different countries would likely pose different challenges, such as the number of languages spoken. Holtzhausen et al. (2003) point out that South Africa’s 11 official languages would “negatively impact practitioners’ ability” to communicate with publics using the press-agentry and public-information models of public relations.

Holtzhausen’s (2000) postmodern perspective on public relations offers a viewpoint that crosses boundaries and, potentially, borders. “[E]xcellence in public relations should not be measured against universal models but against the ability of the practitioner to deal with a particular event, in a particular place” (p. 109). She cautioned that focusing research on comparisons of models developed in the United States to those of other countries offers a narrow focus that does not serve the diversity of the public relations profession.

J. Grunig et al. (1995) suggested that a barrier to public relations filling a strategic management function arises when it “is practiced according to an anachronistic model of the function” (p. 164). The authors suggested evidence that other countries practice some form of the models. Further, the authors suggest the possibility of judging effectiveness based on the norms of a different culture. The comparison of cultures might succeed in evaluating the effectiveness based on one country’s standards, but it could very well fail to accurately reflect the views of people in a different culture.

The responsibility for preparing to work in international and multicultural environments falls mostly on the undergraduate public relations students themselves (Bardhan, 2003), as opposed to the companies that hire them. That education primarily comes in the form of electives in language and international studies and study abroad programs. International public relations professionals have cited a need for curriculum to address the growing need for multicultural education (Bardhan, 2003), but the literature is lacking on what specific skills should be acquired by international practitioners.

Research Question

Public relations is defined as a management function (Cutlip et al, 2000), but the research on educating practitioners tends to focus on technician skills development or program management. The subject of recurring training for public relations practitioners is not well defined in the literature, though continuing education is prominent in professional organizations and public relations trade publications. While much of the literature suggests the importance of public relations being a part of management, not enough research about the development throughout a practitioner's career has been accomplished. Topics that are lacking research include leadership principles and the development of well-rounded practitioners in an effort to prepare them for leadership and managerial roles. In attempting to discover how one segment of the public relations field approaches training, educating, and developing practitioners, the following research questions will be pursued.

RQ1: How do Air Force public affairs officers perceive the value of formal public relations education on their ability to perform their jobs?

RQ2: How do Air Force public affairs officers perceive the value of nontraditional public relations education on their ability to perform their jobs?

RQ3: How do Air Force public affairs officers define their roles?

RQ4: How do Air Force public affairs officers perceive their value to the organization?

RQ5: How do Air Force public affairs officer perceive the difference between their job and civilian public relations?

RQ6: How do Air Force public affairs officers view propaganda?

RQ7: How are public affairs practices perceived differently among those who have formal public relations and/or mass communication education?

CHAPTER 3

U.S. AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The purpose of this chapter is simply to provide context for studying Air Force public affairs. It is not the intent of the author to debate the merits of the definition of public affairs or the existence or absence of propaganda in government communication. Instead, the context should be relevant to the discussion of how public affairs officers develop skills required to carry out the function in which they are serving.

In order to contextualize the function of public affairs in the U.S. Air Force, this section will focus on the demographics of public affairs officers, the process of “hiring” officers to be practitioners, some of the historical events that shaped the career field, and a description of public affairs in the context of the Air Force. First, I will discuss the population, college education, and in-house education of the field. Then, I will present a brief overview of the issue of propaganda and publicity conducted by government agencies in the 20th Century that led to legislation that influences the practice today. Finally, I will present information about the differences and similarities of public relations and public affairs.

U.S. Air Force public affairs officers are charged with conducting public relations functions for the department’s almost 700,000 employees and \$96 billion budget (Snapshot, 2005). The leadership of those functions rests with about 500 active-duty officers who are the current and future managers in the field. They lead a force of about 800 enlisted public affairs practitioners who carry out a range of technical and limited

managerial functions. About 400 Department of the Air Force civilian employees also serve in public affairs positions (AFPC, 2005a).

Education and Training

All Air Force officers are required to have a bachelor's degree before they are commissioned and enter into active duty service. While public affairs does not require a specific degree, desirable degrees include mass or public communication, journalism, public relations, communication arts, advertising, sociology and psychology (AFPC, 2005b). Officer candidates may list preferences for certain career fields, but ultimately the Air Force makes the decision based on needs (AFPC, 2005c). Tables 3.1 and 3.2 display the bachelor's degrees and master's degrees held by officers serving in the public affairs career field (AFPC, 2005a).

Table 3.1. Bachelor's Degree Majors

Bachelor's Degree	no.
Accounting / Economics / Finance	1
Biology	3
Business Administration / Management	20
Computer Science	10
Engineering Technology	2
English	142
Foreign Languages	4
General Studies	9
Human Resources Management	1
Humanities	24
Law	1
Math	1
Other	14
Physics	1
Police Administration	1
Political Science	18
Pre Med	3
Psychology	12
Social Sciences	2
Total	269

After being selected to serve in the public affairs career field, officers are required to attend the Public Affairs Officer Qualification course at the Defense Information School at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland. The scope of the eight and one-half week course is described on the school's website:

Table 3.2. Master's Degree Majors

Master's Degree	no.
Accounting / Economics / Finance	1
Airpower Studies	14
Business Administration / Management	30
Computer Science	1
English	43
General Studies	3
Human Resources Management	13
Humanities	6
Logistics Management	1
Math	1
Other	17
Political Science	8
Pre Med	1
Psychology	5
Social Sciences	7
Total	151

This course is designed to provide instruction and comprehension of the theory, concepts, policies and principles of community relations within the military environment, public affairs communication, speech and research, basic journalist and broadcast instruction necessary for the public affairs officer, public affairs specific for each service, public affairs responsibilities applicable to the unified and specified military command, media relations, and on-camera training and requirements of the public affairs officer in a warfighting scenario (DINFOS, 2005).

The Air Force opened a public information school in the mid-1940s and later combined efforts with the Army to form the Armed Forces Information School at Fort Slocum, New York, in 1951. In 1964, the Department of Defense established the Defense Information School which ended up at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, in 1965. The school was moved to its current location, Fort Meade, in 1995 (Association, n.d.). It is one of the dozen or so schools that has been recognized as Public Relations Society of America Certified in Education for public relations programs (Knott, 2004).

The public relations functions carried out by the public affairs career field are described in the Air Force Doctrine Document 2-5.4 (1999):

The Air Force conducts public affairs operations to communicate unclassified information about Air Force activities to Air Force, domestic, and international audiences. Activities that are part of these operations include but are not limited to public affairs, musical programs, broadcasting, visual information, combat camera, recruiting, and history and museum programs. Public affairs operations allow commanders to assess the public information environment. They also give commanders the means to take preemptive and active measures to “get in front” of and shape public information’s effect on military operations. (p. 1)

The doctrine further details the core areas to carry out Air Force public affairs programs: internal information, community relations, media relations, and security and policy review. Internal information consists of communication to publics within the organization, while community and media relations are external communication and relationship functions. Security and policy review is a function to ensure the appropriateness of information released to a public forum (Doctrine, 1999). While some of the goals appear to be specific to the function of a military service, the responsibilities placed on public affairs officers are essentially the same as those defined for public relations practitioners (Cutlip et al, 2000). This research is specifically focused on the use of public affairs in the U.S. Air Force as a government organization, the education of

its practitioners, and the training those practitioners receive for managerial and leadership responsibilities.

Public Affairs Versus Public Relations

The adoption of the term “public affairs” instead of “public relations” could have been a reaction to the questionable tactics and stigma associated with the latter term. While the government is not prohibited by legislation from conducting public relations activities, a possible explanation for the shift is some activities that drew the ire of Congress and necessitated a change in the name used by government agencies (Cutlip et al., 2000). To further clarify what is allowed and not allowed in government communication, it is necessary to look at the definitions and restrictions implemented by Congress during the 20th century. In the discussion of communication tactics, representatives debated the use of advertising, propaganda, publicity and public relations in various government agencies.

In 1908, Representative Franklin Mondell addressed the practice of government agencies placing news articles in magazines and newspapers. He succeeded in getting approval for his amendment to the appropriations bill for the Department of Agriculture (Congress, 1908), which reads: “That no part of this appropriation shall be paid or used for the purpose of paying for in whole or in part the preparation of any newspaper or magazine article” (p. 4137). The impetus for the amendment was the Department of Agriculture’s practice of tasking government employees to write articles that were subsequently published without any indication of the source. Further, the department requested funding for 30 “collaborators” to carry out publicity duties. Congressman Mondell sought to prevent the department from using tax dollars for publicity that exaggerated its accomplishments or incited the public to criticize the actions of Congress.

He did recognize the role government agencies should do with respect to providing information to taxpayers: “I approve of a proper bureau of publicity to give the public knowledge of what the Department is doing” (p. 4137).

The 61st Congress turned its attention to the publicity efforts of the Census Bureau by questioning its director, E. Dana Durand (Congress, 1910). Issues raised in this session of Congress included the authority of the bureau to hire someone for publicity purposes, the duties of publicity men and the procedures for release of information. In the “views of the minority,” the congressmen assert that neither the publicity efforts nor the expenditures for those efforts were authorized by law. Further, the members claim Congress had not in its history approved a press bureau and would not approve one even if it were proposed.

Next, the 62nd Congress was more specific in defining the limits of government communication when it passed the Gillett Amendment. While there had been instances of congressmen who disapproved of some public relations tactics of some government agencies, one incident appears to have ultimately led Congress to pass the Gillett Amendment in 1913, an amendment that required Congressional approval for the use of tax dollars in publicity efforts (Cutlip *et al.*, 2000). The Office of Public Roads requested a “publicity expert” to promote its “good roads movement.” The job announcement asked for someone who had experience that would be “extensive enough to secure publication of items prepared by him” (p. 501). The frustration of the legislatures in the three issues discussed to that point centered on publicity efforts to direct public criticism of the views of Congress.

The reason government agencies avoid using the term “public relations” is not clear, but examples of the misconception of that reason surfaces in the practice. The perception that public relations is prohibited in government agencies is somewhat off the mark as well. For example, the National Institute of Aging (Council, 2004) is a government agency which is charged by Congress to “carry out public information and education programs to disseminate the findings of the Institute and all other relevant information which may assist all Americans, and especially the elderly, in dealing with the problems [of] and understanding the processes associated with aging” (n.p.). In this instance, Congress has specifically paved the way for the public relations efforts, though the agency places the responsibility on its Office of Communication and Public Liaison.

Cutlip et al. (2000) stated government public relations practitioners fulfill many roles, but their primary job is to inform the public about programs. That description is consistent with what is labeled the public information model – a model that involves primarily one-way communication (Grunig et al, 2002). Contributing to the discussion about what public relations activities are appropriate for government agencies, Cutlip et al. (2000) presented two specific purposes: “(1) that a democratic government must report its activities to the citizens, and (2) that effective government administration requires active citizen participation and support” (p. 491). It might be somewhat difficult to separate what activities in these purposes would be considered inappropriate. For instance, what is defined as public information activity by one party might easily be labeled by another party as propaganda.

Propaganda in the government was investigated by the House Subcommittee on Publicity and Propaganda in 1947. In the hearing, the committee members questioned

whether activities of the Department of Agriculture in Nebraska consisted of propaganda and lobbying efforts paid for with appropriated funds. In response to a wire informing field offices of potential large cuts in the department's budget, the field office in Nebraska distributed letters that included the following statement: "The recent congressional action not only affects the immediate status of agriculture but may eventually result in economic disaster of agriculture and the Nation in the years ahead" (p. 6). The field offices paid men who were not considered government employees to coordinate activities and communicate with farmers. Upon being notified of the pending cuts in appropriations, the "committeemen" distributed letters with government letterhead informing the farmers in their respective counties of the cuts. Further, evidence was presented that the letters contained statements such as "Write a letter to your Congressman and let us keep our program in force" (p. 44). While the arguments before the committee focused primarily on the urging of farmers to contact Congressmen to protest the budget cuts, the gloom and doom statements received very little attention.

In June of 1947, the War Department had to explain to Congress whether it had used tax dollars to promote legislation on universal military training (Congress, 1947). As part of its campaign to promote the program, the War Department hired advisors to travel across the country to speak with citizens. One such advisor caught the attention of committee members when she was quoted describing her purpose was to reach people who "had the ability to swing others in their communities or in groups with which they work" (p. 5). Other tactics the committee members opposed were requests by government agencies for citizens to appeal to Congress to vote favorably on the program

and exaggerated claims of the benefits of the training, such as avoiding deaths like those the United States suffered in World War II.

Both of the above investigations brought into question the use of government funds to influence the public to take action. Also, both involved the employment of nongovernmental employees to carry out campaigns. Further, the focus of the investigations was not so much on the ends being sought, rather on the tactics being used.

DeSanto (2001) summarized the conundrum between a government being responsible to the public, yet scrutinized for how it conducts communication efforts:

The key factor in the original Congressional scenario, therefore, centers around the fact that US legislators believe that the word 'publicity' was, and still is, interpreted to mean the same thing, and be used interchangeably with, 'public relations'. The intent of the legislators was to prevent incumbent government officials from using their power and positions to influence legislation. This single-minded idea, however, was in direct conflict with the principle that democracy relies on a relatively free communication structure providing information and methods of discussing issues to its citizens so they can make informed decisions. (p. 39)

The responsibilities placed on a public relations practitioner, regardless of the choice of title for the function, encompass a variety of functions. Marconi (2004) included the following under the "umbrella" of public relations: "communications, community relations, customer relations, consumer affairs, employee relations, industry relations, international relations, investor relations, issues management, media relations, member relations, press agency, promotions, publicity, public affairs, shareholder relations, speechwriting, and visitor relations" (p. 22). The general idea of those

functions applies even though the titles might vary from organization to organization.

For example, maintaining relationships and communication with investors is more likely to involve the ownership of shares in a company. However, the principle of maintaining and establishing communication and relationships with those who finance (i.e. taxpayers) the operation is a similar concept.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the formal and nontraditional educational experiences by a group of Air Force public affairs officers and the value those practitioners place on their learning experiences. Also, this research will explore how those officers view their career field in comparison with the larger concept of public relations. Creswell (1998) suggests qualitative research provides an opportunity “to assess an issue with an understudied group or population” (p. 94). Indeed, research focusing on this particular segment of the public relations practice is limited. To gain the in-depth insight necessary for an exploratory study, data was collected through the use of personal interviews.

Sample

The participants for the study were purposively selected to provide a range of formal education and nontraditional education experiences. The purpose for selecting participants with different criteria is to better study the range of experiences, rather than make statistical inferences (Creswell, 1998). The researcher used personal contacts to obtain contact information for people who met the following criteria:

- Educated in public relations, but little experience
- Experienced, but not educated in public relations
- Educated in public relations and experienced
- Not educated in public relations and little experience

Participants

Five public affairs officers ranging from two to 13 years of experience were ultimately selected for this study. Two of the participants had public relations emphases in their undergraduate work, two had a communication focus and one majored in English. Two of the participants had master's degrees, but in fields unrelated to public relations or mass communication. Since all participants requested anonymity, the researcher numbered the participants R1 through R5 based on their years of experience. For example, R1 had the least experience and R5 had the most. The breakdown of education and experience is displayed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. List of Participants' Qualifications

Participant	Experience	Undergraduate Degree	Graduate Degree
R1	2 years	Communications	n/a
R2	3 years	Mass and Interpersonal Communication	n/a
R3	3 ½ years	Public relations	n/a
R4	10 years	English	Public Administration
R5	13 years	Broadcasting, print journalism and public relations	Management

In this type of qualitative study, it is imperative that the practitioners relate their experiences in formal and informal education as it applies to their organization (Yin, 2003). Separating their experiences from the context of their organization would likely give different meaning to the results.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by telephone due to the geographical separation of the participants and time and the financial requirements of traveling to multiple locations to

conduct face-to-face interviews. According to Creswell (1998), “a telephone interview provides the best source of information when the researcher does not have direct access to individuals” (p. 124). However, a negative aspect of the telephone interview is the lack of ability to observe nonverbal communication.

The interviews were recorded digitally into a computer-based audio editing program. Also, a stand-alone digital recorder was used as a back up. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher for the reasons articulated by Tilley (2003). Those reasons include the opportunity for the researcher to maintain control over the transcription decisions and to take advantage of the understanding processes that occur during transcription.

The interviews were conducted using a question guide of topical questions covering public relations issues from the literature reviewed. Below is the question guide the researcher followed during the interviews.

- 1. How would you describe the job of a public affairs officer?**
 - a. Technical tasks**
 - b. Managerial role**
- 2. How would you compare public relations with public affairs?**
 - a. Associated tasks**
 - b. Public perception**
- 3. What has prepared you to practice public affairs?**
 - a. College education**
 - b. Military training schools**
 - c. On-the-job training**
- 4. How would you assess your abilities as a practitioner?**

- a. Technical functions
 - b. Managerial role
- 5. How, if at all, did your undergraduate education prepare you for the job you're doing.
 - a. Skills learned
 - b. General knowledge
- 6. Would you describe an incident or crisis that you feel you handled effectively?
 - a. What prepared you, or helped you, to handle that situation?
 - b. Training
 - c. Education
 - d. Prior experience
- 7. What about public relations, if anything, do you wish you knew more about?
 - a. Education specific
 - b. Technical/managerial aspects
- 8. How would you describe the role of propaganda in your job?
 - a. Public perceptions
 - b. Other Airmen's views
 - c. Connotations associated with propaganda
- 9. To what extent do you feel as though public affairs people are respected by others in the organization?
 - a. The value of your role?
 - b. Reputation of the public affairs career field

Participants were sent an electronic signed consent form as an e-mail attachment and asked to sign and return the form to the researcher via fax. University of Florida Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to conducting the interviews.

The interviews averaged about 40 minutes. The shortest interview was 35 minutes and the longest was 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using a three-step method of description, reduction, and interpretation by grouping the responses to identify overlapping themes from the transcribed interviews. Themes from the transcript of each participant were initially separated into subcategories closely aligned with the question guide. When appropriate, categories were combined or expanded as necessary. The researcher then documented how each participant described the different themes, as suggested by Creswell (1998). The results and researchers interpretations of the data are included in the remaining chapters of this study.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to report findings from interviews conducted with Air Force public affairs officers and to interpret their responses. The question guide in Chapter 4 was used as a starting point to allow the participants to express opinions and perceptions of both the field in which they practice and the impact of education and training on their experiences as public affairs officers. The topics contained in the question guide and research questions served as preliminary categories for data analysis. Next, the categories contained in the research questions were collapsed into three themes: education, roles, and differences between public affairs and public relations. Finally, the researcher will present two themes that did not fall into the original categories: rank and crisis communication.

The participants in this study represented a range of experience from two years to 13 years as Air Force public affairs officers. None of the participants had any experience working in public relations outside the military. The civilian education accomplished by the participants ranged from no classes in mass communication or public relations to a bachelor's degree in public relations. All participants completed the public affairs officer course at the Defense Information School. To provide the participants anonymity, they will be identified as R1 through R5. The numbers correspond to the level of experience and rank of the participant in comparison with the others. For example, R1 had the least amount of experience and rank, while R5 had the most experience and held the highest rank. R1, R2, and R3 were serving their second assignment, R1 was on his third

assignment, and R5 was on his fifth assignment. Only one participant, R5, had been stationed overseas, but another participant, R4, had served several temporary duty assignments overseas ranging from one to four months. At the time of the interviews, two of the participants were assigned to base-level jobs, while the other three were serving at higher levels. The base-level public affairs officers are responsible for the public affairs activities at their bases, while the public affairs officers at the higher levels are responsible for providing counsel to a number of bases.

Theme 1: Education

This theme explores how Air Force public affairs officers perceive the value of formal public relations and nontraditional education in relation to their abilities to perform their jobs. Three participants had mass communication degrees and also had a public relations emphasis area for their undergraduate majors. All three stated some aspect of public relations education has helped them in their jobs, but they placed more importance on the communication education they received. For example, R1, who majored in communication and had one public relations course, viewed his education as extremely important in preparing him for his job. He valued learning “public speaking, listening skills, [and] of course writing is one of the, if not the, most important thing. Being able to clearly write down your thoughts to communicate to someone else, that’s a very big skill.” R4 and R5 hold master’s degrees; however, the degrees are in disciplines unrelated to public relations or mass communication. R4, who majored in English and had not completed any coursework in mass communication, stated that he did not see a need for an extensive education in public relations. “I think there needs to be a basic understanding of communication and how to speak, but there are wonderful math majors out there who just happen to be really good mass communicators as well.” R3 provided

the strongest support for the value he places on public relations education. “I use things I learned [in college] almost on a daily basis starting with journalism, writing and editing.”

Participants who studied public relations in college said they valued the history, campaign planning and interpersonal communication skills they acquired. R1 explained why he thinks history is important.

[Y]ou need to understand the history of how it came about and some of the intricacies, because it’s one thing to do a job and to not understand it. But, if everything is so mechanical, you are just going through the motions. But, to have a firm grasping with the history, with the background, with the intricate details, with the techniques you learn in school, I think that it is a must.

R5 said his mass communication education included specific public relations courses that helped him learn technical skills and enhanced his understanding of the job. “[The courses I took dealt specifically with developing communications plans and how PR relates to the world...so that’s the one area that I would say helped me the most.”

Those who did not have public relations education did stress that they thought a basic education in communication was important for public affairs officers, but nonetheless felt qualified for their positions. None of the participants felt as though an undergraduate degree in public relations was a necessary prerequisite for a public affairs officer. R4 had no mass communication training, but felt as though his education and training has been sufficient.

I don’t think an undergraduate mass communications degree is necessary. I’m an English major and I think I do well. I’ve seen engineers that have done well. I think you get some base level communication information...I think the most important thing is going out and doing it.

In his opinion, the skills he learned as an English major, specifically writing, provided the basic communication skills he saw as important for public affairs officers. R5 expressed a similar view, though he related to communication in a broader sense.

You've gotta provide some kind of foundations for communication. You have to provide some of that coursework to make them understand how to communicate and what makes communication programs effective. Do you have to have a degree to be an effective public affairs officer? No. Do you have to have a degree in communications to be an effective public affairs officer? No. Do you have to have some coursework or something that has provided you the foundation to do that and understand that? Yes.

The responses showed very little difference in perceptions of the value of a public relations or mass communication education, despite the participants' different levels of education. For example, regardless of the type of education the participants had, on-the-job experience was viewed as the most critical factor for the development of practitioner skills. Participants who had undergraduate education in public relations indicated that their education was important, but all suggested people from different educational backgrounds could do their jobs with the military training and on-the-job experience provided by the Air Force. For example, R1 indicated it is possible that a practitioner could excel if he had only the training provided by the Air Force.

If that person can go through DINFOS and can learn the skills necessary DINFOS is more than enough to train I'd say a good majority of the population to be prepared for public affairs life in the Air Force. I've nothing but good things to say about that. Like I've said, it was one of the best experiences I've had. I would say that if he went to DINFOS, he could definitely do an outstanding job in public affairs. And that goes for people who didn't even go to college...I think they would be more than ready to practice it in the field.

R2 added that experience would eventually close the gap between someone who started off with a communication education.

Someone who had an engineering degree would have a harder time going in to PA than someone who had a journalism class...it's not impossible to be a good PA eventually if you didn't have an undergraduate in journalism or mass communication, I mean you could still succeed...it would just be harder as far as starting off.

R5 stated he believes that DINFOS provides the basic technical tools to help people without a prior understanding of communication.

[C]an you expect someone who just comes off a college campus without a degree in anything or without an education anywhere dealing with communications to walk in and be an effective public affairs officer? No. You've gotta provide some kind of foundations for communication. You have to provide some of that coursework to make them understand how to communicate and what makes communication programs effective.

It is noteworthy to point out, the difference in comments could be explained by R5's description of public affairs as more than a technical function. However, all of the participants were consistent in recognizing the foundation of technical skills for an entry-level practitioner. Determining what constitutes a foundation in communication might prove difficult as well. Among the communication disciplines, mass communication, writing and interpersonal communication were used interchangeably. This suggests some differences in perception among the participants as to what a public relations education would, or does, entail.

Participants suggested the DINFOS training course provided adequate technical skills training that would be sufficient for providing a foundation for practitioners who had no mass communication or public relations education.

All participants valued the public affairs officer training at the Defense Information School, but on-the-job training and experience was viewed as the most significant factors affecting the practitioners' abilities to perform their duties. On-the-job training involved participation in regularly scheduled emergency drills and practice runs for going into combat operations. Other training included attending annual public affairs conferences and various training seminars that addressed issues specific to their career field.

The topic of training and experience brought several different responses from the participants. Generally, participants with the least amount of job experience responded

more favorably to the training received at the Defense Information School than did those with more experience. For example, R1 stated,

To this point the best training I had was probably at DINFOS and that was probably one of the best courses I have ever taken in my life. The teachers really knew what they were doing. They were able to assess strengths and weaknesses and they really showed you how to do the job; I mean in any situation – at a deployed situation, at a home situation and they trained you so much and so well that I was so confident that no matter where I went I'd be able to do the job.

R4 and R5 considered the DINFOS course as a starting point.

R4: "I think the school is a good program. I think it gives you a basic foundation. I don't think it prepares you completely to practice. I think the only thing that can prepare you to practice public affairs is actually doing it, so time, my time in [the field] has enhanced the basics that I learned in DINFOS."

R5: "Nothing like doing it on the job has prepared me for anything else. Yes the education gave the theory behind it, the tech[nical] training gives you some background as far as resources to use in looking for information and how to get things done and accomplished. But as far as executing public affairs in the Air Force, nothing prepared me more than just doing it on the job."

R2 also talked about how she values the role of her colleagues in her on the job training experiences. "I think that's the best training you can have...If you have people that let you do things without any help, you're going to crash and burn...that doesn't seem to be the case in any offices I've been in." R1 had a different experience. In his first job, he was forced to seek out opportunities by volunteering to accompany others as they conducted tours and media interviews. He stated if he had not sought opportunities to gain experience, "I would be just sitting at my desk doing absolutely nothing."

Assessing the effectiveness of training and experience in the case of Air Force public affairs officers might prove to be just as challenging as defining effectiveness in the public relations field. Without some standard of measurement, one must rely on what practitioners and management perceive as effectiveness. Complicating the assessment of training and education is the public affairs officers' understanding or perception of just

how much public affairs is, or is not, public relations. Participants in this study indicated that if practitioners and management are satisfied, then that seems to be sufficient. The researcher is not suggesting at this point that the Air Force would be more successful at accomplishing its mission if public affairs education and training more closely aligned with recommendations by professional organizations and academics. However, one factor that could give cause for concern is the reliance on the transfer of knowledge from others in the public affairs field. Public affairs officers who are being trained by people who share similar education and training backgrounds, might be putting their field at a disadvantage with respect to keeping up with the advances of new research in the field.

Theme 2: Roles

How the participants define their jobs and the value of their contributions to the Air Force mission are discussed in this theme. In an attempt to explore the roles of public affairs officers, both from the practitioner and the practitioner's perception of how others inside the organization view, the participants were asked how they define their job and how they perceive others in the organization view them. Communication, or more specifically dissemination of information, was the primary function described by the participants. Other roles that surfaced in the interviews include environmental scanning, community relations activities, internal communication and media relations.

While descriptions of the job of a public affairs officer varied somewhat, the participants placed the greatest amount of emphasis on communication. R1 said he felt as though a public affairs officer's job is primarily information dissemination that informs taxpayers how their money is being spent. "I'd say it's mostly informing the public about what we do and whether that's through the newspaper, magazine, TV, radio...I think that is ultimately what Air Force public affairs is all about."

R2 tied accomplishing the mission of the Air Force to the job of public affairs officer by describing public affairs as a function that supports the mission by developing community relations and building a foundation for the community and base to work together. R4, defined his job as a public affairs officer as primarily communication but linked the impact to accomplishing the overall mission of the base: “The very basic idea is you use your communication skills to make it easier to achieve the mission of that base. So, I’m here to make sure those [airplanes] are able to get off the ground and return on a regular basis.”

While relationships were addressed, none of the practitioners talked specifically about developing “mutually beneficial” relationships with key publics. Instead, monitoring of and communicating with publics were the focus of attention. R5 provided an explanation of two areas he focuses on in his job description.

First and foremost in my mind is to help keep the wing commander aware of issues that could affect his unit...perceptions internally with his people, you know the people in the unit, as well as externally, the people in the community. If you’re not providing that assessment, if you’re not providing ‘hey this issue is coming up and these are the ramifications if you don’t address it,’ you’re not doing your job completely. Second is how you can best communicate the commander’s visions, desires and needs to the internal and external audiences as appropriate.

Except for experiences with “good” commanders in the Air Force, participants tended to describe a work environment that was often hostile toward public affairs activities. The participants generally perceived a lack of value placed on their roles, except when their organizations were facing a crisis situation. While the participants appeared to like their jobs, the theme of struggling for acceptance was prevalent. For example, none of the participants indicated they felt as though the majority of the people in the Air Force respected what public affairs officers bring to the organization; rather, it is often seen as a “necessary evil” and a “nuisance.” Two respondents offered similar

views that there are many people who would not miss public affairs if it “disappeared tomorrow.” However, there was a difference between how the participants see their value in the eyes of senior management versus those who are below that level. R4 suggested it is the military mindset that impacts whether others respect his function.

[W]e really don’t have an Air Force related job if you will. They can understand how cops are related to the jet, they have to protect the jet and the people...force protection is very important. They just see us as kind of outsiders reporting on this, not that we are Airmen ourselves. I just think they see us as an extra...that in a totalitarian or different kind of government we wouldn’t need this at all to run the military. They wouldn’t need us at all. I don’t think China has very many public affairs officers.

R5 viewed appreciation as a form of respect for what the public affairs function contributes and it is something that filters from the top down.

There is a greater appreciation for the need of public affairs as a career field. We still have a ways to go, though, before it’s truly on an equal footing with anybody else. There are still leaders out there who treat public affairs as a necessary evil as opposed to a valued resource. When you have a leader of a unit who uses it that way, the lower level leadership feeds off that. When you have a leader that values public affairs, promotes public affairs and is constantly pulling on public affairs to get their advice, again the leadership underneath there feeds off that and tends to go to public affairs more. Our appreciation is growing, but it still has a ways to go.

R1 talked about how others associate public affairs only with the products produced.

Public affairs does not do a good job educating people about what we do. I think that people just see the products. People say oh ok we’ve got a paper...ok yeah that’s what they do. Or they see an interview that goes on...okay that’s what they do. They facilitated an interview...they kind of stand there and they’re there to make sure everything goes smoothly. They don’t really understand all the intricate details and all the work that gets put into these. They only see the final product.

Despite the perceived negative views of others in the organization, the participants valued their own contributions and, in several instances, described how important they are to the mission. One example is how the public affairs officers must help ensure a base is able to function by maintaining good standing in the community. R4 captured the

idea of how valuable he perceives his function as one that enables his base to continue operations in his community.

You have to one build local community support to ensure that base has the ability to run because as you know without public support it can erode and the public does have a way of making AF bases go away.

Despite some concern that others in the organization might not value public affairs, the participants generally expressed their perceptions to be that public affairs practitioners have a good reputation among other service members in the Air Force. A good reputation, however, did not necessarily indicate others in the organization would overlook what they view as an imposition. R3 provided an explanation why he thinks it is difficult for public affairs officers to be accepted by others.

You know, most of the time when we call people we're asking for stuff they don't feel comfortable doing. And anytime you have a situation like that, it's tough. But, I also believe the better we do our job and the more professional we are when we do our job, hopefully that mindset changes and you start to find your niche inside the organization. And people start seeing the things that you're doing for them, not just what they're doing for you.

Other participants described how their jobs involved asking people to go against what their own training had taught them. Much of what Air Force people do is considered sensitive or, in some cases, even classified. People view public affairs as an open door to the public without seeing the difference between public affairs officers and the media. R4 stated, "We're still kind of thought of as we're the media. We're still thought of as 'oh public affairs is coming, I have to go on camera.'" In many cases, the participants stated that others in the organization took their cues from leadership. R5 described the effects when leadership places a strategic importance on public affairs activities.

Right now I think our reputation is decent and that's only because we have had a few successes as of late...or we haven't, I should say, had any mission failures that would cause anybody to question public affairs' reputation or capabilities. I think current Air Force leadership appreciates what public affairs brings to the table and

is using it. And with the reorganization up there looking at strategic communications with public affairs being a key cornerstone of that effort, not being the whole effort, but a key cornerstone of that effort, reflects showing that appreciation for what we do and for what we bring to the table.

R2 described the career field's reputation as good, due to the perception that she has a difficult job—one that is harder than it looks.

I think they respect us because you can't do the job unless you are a competent person...you have to be able to multi-task...and I think that when people see us escorting the media and doing those things that they develop a respect for us... 'oh that really doesn't look that easy...oh man they have to go on camera, and if they say something wrong they're going to get messed over'

The lack of perceived value placed on the function of public affairs could be explained by the participants' account of the misunderstanding of what contributions public affairs practitioners can and should provide. Participants in this study expressed concern that the number of people in the organization who understand what they do is limited. When asked about educating others on the role of public affairs, the practitioners did not embrace the need to develop mutually beneficial relationships with people who are at levels below senior management.

R4: People who matter are increasingly aware of our function and respect it. I don't need a maintainer on the flight line to respect my function. I need a squadron commander to, I need a group commander to, [and] obviously I need my wing commander to.

R5 indicated people who work at lower levels of the organization typically do not see themselves as needing public affairs.

Right or wrong, I would say that the everyday Joe Airman on the flightline turning wrenches needs public affairs and wants public affairs when he has something...when he has an agenda or an issue that specifically drives him to want us.

The trend among participants indicated both the public affairs officers and other people in the organization relied on each other only when dictated by necessity. L. Grunig et al.

(2002) posited “communication managers are enormously valuable when they identify and work to develop relationships with the groups most vital to the organization that employs them” (p. 97). In the case of the Air Force, public affairs officers stated they rely heavily on people in the organization to accomplish their communication function. Perhaps the lack of understanding is a result of the expectation that people in an organization should support the public affairs mission because they are team players. While that might be understandable, better attitudes toward public affairs officers could result if they placed more importance on developing relationships throughout the organization, rather than reaching out to people only when they need something. The need for cooperation is multiplied in those cases the participants described as asking people to do things they do not feel comfortable doing.

The absence of focus on developing relationships suggests that opportunities to develop relationships with all levels of the organization are either not stressed in training or are simply set aside at some point. Part of the relationship building would involve educating others about the mission and goals of public affairs in an attempt to find a mutually beneficial relationship with the internal public. The participants’ descriptions of the manner in which they practice suggest they are qualified to do the job they are asked to do, but could be missing out on what kind of job they could be doing. Perhaps authority provided by implementing a program supported by top management is more common internally.

Theme 3: Differences Between Public Affairs and Public Relations

How Air Force public affairs officer perceive the difference between their job and civilian public relations is explored in this section. Participants described the differences between the two job titles in different terms, but the theme was consistent that public

relations and public affairs are different specialties. The participants' descriptions of public relations ranged from "spin doctor" to marketing and advertising products. One participant stated public affairs and public relations are "essentially the same thing," but other participants steered clear of associating themselves with public relations.

The fundamental difference drawn between the two was the perception that public relations is primarily involved in selling a product, while public affairs is simply providing information about the organization. R2 stated the public perception between public relations and public affairs had some differences as well. "I think they see a patriotic backing behind what you're doing and I think they are actually a little nicer to you." R4 described a much different perception from the perspective of news media.

[A]nytime they see us in action, like when somebody had talking points...when they see us doing the things that PR, PA guys do, preparing them to speak, giving them messages...that's almost looked at as though we are doing it covertly...it's some kind of calculated misperception that we are trying to manage their thoughts.

Participants were asked to explain the difference between public affairs and public relations, and the responses indicate the practitioners considered the functions to be similar, but with different desired outcomes. Generally, the participants viewed their own roles as providing transparency for the taxpayers, while the civilian sector was geared toward making a profit and selling products. Also, some of the participants thought the term "public affairs" did not have a negative stigma attached to it as much as "public relations."

R3: You ask a person what PR is and they'll tell you it's a spin doctor just spinning all the bad and good. I was taught and I've gone on to make my own opinions that it's always best to bring the truth out, and the Air Force demands that. I think that's what people don't realize is you know when we come up, when we come out with a problem it's not necessarily that we are hiding anything, what we tell you is all we know, and I really respect that about the Air Force.

R4 perceived the difference to be in the end goal of the organization rather than a different function for practitioners in public affairs or public relations.

[C]ivilian public relations practitioners are usually involved with marketing a product, whereas we are involved with communicating... not marketing, let me say they are involved with a product that is for sale...sometimes that's an elected official...somebody campaigning...it's not necessarily McDonalds hamburgers or cars or whatever. There is a product there they are trying to move; whereas, in military public affairs we are dealing with, I guess it's a product, but it's already owned by the buyer—the taxpayer. They have a right to know about our Air Force. And so we have a duty to be completely honest and forthright and be timely and accurate with all our information; whereas, on the private side there's not necessarily that moral requirement or that legal requirement, but also I think they have good business sense to practice that way.

R5 saw the differences as more of a product of what the practitioners do the most.

There are some obvious fundamental differences. There are things military members have to train and prepare for that are not strictly public affairs related, and be willing to execute the orders as given that civilian counterparts don't have to deal with. They are strictly dealing with public relations type things, type issues. I think on the civilian side there are things they deal with that public affairs folks do not, such as budgeting as far as trying to figure out how much you are charging a client for what work, getting materials produced and how much it's going to cost and budgeting for that, most public affairs officers don't have to do that. I think on the civilian side they are better at planning, overall planning for big events than on the military side.

As far as the mission of a public affairs officer, participants described tasks as being similar, but still drew a distinction between the public relations practitioners and themselves. For example, R2's comments on the topic were typical of the responses provided by the other participants. "Public relations and public affairs are two different things, but the same basic skills help each other out; and I was helped out by the courses I took in college."

In all forms of public relations practice, the job is defined and its scope is determined by an organization's management philosophy. In the case of participants included in this research, the scope of public affairs is not limited only to practitioners

understanding, but also to others in the organization as well. Air Force public affairs would be included in the group of government agencies that Cutlip et al. (2000) suggest identify the public relations function as public affairs due to confusion created by legislation prohibiting certain forms of publicity and propaganda.

Based on data from the participants in this research, that confusion is potentially a detriment to public affairs officers aligning themselves with what Cutlip et al. (2000) describe as “the larger concept of public relations” (p. 15). Therefore, the participants see themselves more as communicators than “a specialized part of public relations that builds and maintains governmental and local community relations in order to influence public policy” (Cutlip et al., 2000). Despite the participants’ description of their jobs as including many typical functions of public relations – such as writing, media relations, event planning, counseling, publicity, community relations, issues management (Seitel, 2004)—the public affairs officers are perhaps restrained from fully exploring the capabilities of their career field because of the tendency to disassociate themselves with the term “public relations.”

While the public relations field struggles with the negative perceptions of “flacks” and “spin doctors,” Air Force public affairs officers also have to combat the perception of propaganda. Without exception the participants viewed propaganda as a negative term and something that has no place in their work. R3 indicated truth was key to making a distinction between providing public information and propaganda.

From where I’ve worked, the experiences that I’ve had, we tended to have a pretty open...we are pretty open with the information that we have and you know we’re constantly trying to get the truth out there and even if the truth isn’t necessarily the greatest news, we’re willing to get that news out there to try to then put forth our messages about how we are trying to correct any problems we may have.

R4 described his frustration with people doubting the integrity of public affairs practitioners.

The PR guys in the civilian world I think are looked at as marketers...they have a job, they are trying to sell a product...that's okay. But, when you have a public relations guy that works for a government entity like the military, I think the practitioners are looked at as spin doctors, as "why do you even need a public affairs guy? We just want to know what's going on. It's our Air Force....we ought to be able to know." We really are trying to manage perception, but I still think this—and the day I stop feeling this way I'll get out—is that Air Force public affairs are all given the marching orders to speak the truth, to get the truth out there and get it out fast...and when that changes it will be time for me to go.

The participants mostly associated propaganda with not being truthful or only providing positive information. . One topic that emerged from the propaganda discussion was that the public affairs function still suffers from the actions that occurred in the past, such as during the Vietnam conflict and the two world wars. Several participants suggested some people in the Air Force perceive that their is defending freedom and felt as though the need to be transparent impeded that mission. The participants indicated part of their job is educating their internal audience to build an understanding of the principles of an honest, open government.

Emergent Themes: Rank and Crises

The status or rank of the public affairs practitioner was a theme that emerged consistently among the participants. From the researcher's perspective it was the rank, not competence, of the practitioners that was perceived as detrimental to convincing Air Force people of an appropriate course of action for activities that occur during normal operations.

The rank of the practitioners was an issue for R1 and R2 for different reasons. R1 stated that higher-ranking officers do not give him respect because of his rank, regardless of what expertise he brings to the table.

I think in the civilian world it is a lot easier in so many regards. Everything from the way you dress to the way you present yourself. Someone who has a baby face may be 35 40 years old. I think perceptions on the outside is a little different because you can always change your image, you can always change things whereas in the military, no matter how you look you have your rank on your shoulders if you're an officer or on your sleeve if you are enlisted. And no matter what the facial features are they judge you by that rank. If you are a lieutenant like me it's a lot harder. They don't give you the respect that you deserve as even a person.

R2 stated that superiors equate the importance of the work being accomplished with the rank. "Oh it can't be that big of a deal because if you have these low ranking people working on it, it can't be that big of a deal." Both participants stated they were very confident in their abilities as practitioners. R2 stated that her interpersonal communication education helps her when working with other Air Force people.

The interpersonal aspect really taught me about different people, how to talk to different people and different standings as far as a business standpoint. For instance, in public affairs you work with a lot of senior ranking officers versus any other career field. You get a maintenance second lieutenant and they're not working with a [senior officer] every single day like you do in public affairs. So I think that a lot of the interpersonal communication skills I learned in my undergraduate prepared me for the way I talk to my superiors and my subordinates. I think it's really helped me a lot with understanding where they're coming from and how to work for them.

Rank was less of an issue for the participants when their organizations were facing a crisis situation. Participants gave examples of being thrust into a difficult situation and how they relied on training to work through it successfully. Participants who were faced with a crisis situation during their careers suggested they were able to avoid or diffuse a crisis confidently due in large part to training or experience. R5 said crisis communication is an area in which he thinks military public affairs officers are well suited.

[W]e are geared toward dealing with crises. We exercise regularly whether it's [inspections], doing deployments, [or] simulating plane crashes. We run through those drills on a regular basis. That allows us to train and practice what we would do in a crisis situation. Plus, we seem to be always in a perpetual crisis

mode...whether it's a minor crisis of some controversy dealing with the Pentagon up to a major plane crash.

The participant with the least experience described a situation where her public affairs boss was out of town when a crisis situation occurred. While the practitioner was able to confer with the supervisors over the telephone, the interaction with commanders in diffusing the situation was on her shoulders. She credited her on-the-job training provided by her office along with the training she received at DINFOS for giving her the confidence to manage the crisis to her satisfaction and to the satisfaction of her commander and others.

I feel like I've seen the worst and did okay. My office had confidence in me through that situation. A lot of the senior staff had confidence in me so they would come to me directly. I don't know, maybe I was at the right place at the right time with the right people and that's how I was able to gather that kind of training and reinforcements that other people may not have.

R4 shared a similar experience early in his career where he found himself providing counsel to his top commander.

[School] can't teach you the nuances of convincing a [general] to act in a certain way...and especially as a lieutenant. You hope that he has enough confidence in you to say, and I didn't really have to sell it to him, but he did listen to me and did everything I asked. I think that time in the PA career field, that little bit of time that I had at that point, allowed me to go to him in a way that he said "yeah he is right" and he didn't react negatively and say "this is a lieutenant...I'm going to go do it my way."

Crediting their training experience, the practitioners reveled in the opportunity to shine in a crisis. Perhaps it is the emphasis and status placed on even the most junior practitioners that occurs in crisis situation. Beyond that, practitioners related a sense of frustration in accomplishing public affairs activities because of not only lack of respect for their field, but also the lack of status afforded to practitioners because of their rank.

This suggests an added dimension possibly exacerbated in public relations in the Air Force due to the added dynamics created by a rank-conscious organizational structure.

The themes discussed in this chapter provide a look into how the participants view themselves as practitioners in the Air Force and how they fit into the overall field of public relations. Mass communication or public relations education was viewed primarily as a starting point that could make entering the practice easier, but Air Force training and experience on the job were given more consideration for participants in this study. The perceptions of the participants of the value of education, training, and experience did not vary significantly despite differences among the participants' level of education and experience.

The roles assumed by the participants seemed to be determined more by the organization's culture than the potential courses of action that might be expected from a public relations counselor. That environment could be a contributing factor that helps explain why the participants did not relate with being public relations practitioners. Finally, two areas the researcher thought were important to include were the difficulties the public affairs officers faced because of their rank and the opposite effect of authority and confidence they assumed when facing a crisis situation. In the next chapter, the researcher will discuss the implications of the findings as they relate to practicing public affairs in the Air Force, as well as how they relate to the field of public relations.

CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher will summarize the findings presented in Chapter 5 and discuss the implications for the field of public relations. Through the researcher's interpretation of the participants' responses, three major themes were explored: education, roles, and differences between public affairs and public relations. After a discussion of implications of the findings, the researcher will suggest opportunities for further research.

Implications

Public relations scholars have suggested education appropriate for practitioners at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Commission, 1999; Hon, 2004; IPRA, 1990). The trend in research shows an increased emphasis in courses specific to public relations as the number of qualified faculty and available institutions increased over time. That trend resulted in recommendations that as much as 40 percent of coursework should be in public relations (Commission, 1999). If that recommendation is followed, public relations students would have fewer opportunities to combine other disciplines degree programs or require students to potentially exceed the standard hour requirement for most undergraduate degree plans. Expecting public relations students to "include a minor or double major in another discipline" (Commission, n.p.), might not always be feasible due to student's financial and time constraints.

The views of the participants in this study indicate the potential for an alternative recommendation to consider, such as a communication education with a minor in public

relations. From the participants' perspectives, on the job experience combined with a basic education in communication is an approach that worked for them. Perhaps scholars and practitioners involved in public relations education studies should reevaluate the position that "[p]rograms that offer minors should make it clear that a minor in public relations is not sufficient to prepare a student for the professional practice of public relations" (Commission, n.p.). While the general recommendation for the entire field of public relations could be justified, the language in the report excludes the possibility that other avenues could achieve what its intended purpose was purported to be.

The purpose of an undergraduate degree in public relations is to prepare students for an entry-level position in public relations and to assume a leadership role over the course of their careers in advancing the profession and professionally representing their employers. Students must be educated broadly in the liberal arts and sciences, and specifically in public relations, so that they are fully employable upon graduation (Commission, 1999, n.p.).

As stated in Chapter 5, it could prove difficult to assess the effectiveness of training and experience in making college graduates "fully employable." In the case of Air Force public affairs officers, one might argue they are not fully employable by PRSA standards. Without some method of measuring the effectiveness of public relations practitioners, we have to rely on what practitioners and management perceive as effective. Perhaps efforts to define an educational curriculum should be supplemented with a career guide that incorporates learned experiences.

The roles perceived by practitioners in this study seemingly coincide with what is expected of them by others in the organization – most importantly, their commanders. Cutlip et al. (2000) suggest that an organization's image and commitment to public relations is determined in large part by its top management's actions. "As those in top management act and speak, so go the interpretations and echoes created by the public

relations function” (p. 63). The participants in this study supported that concept. Not only did the commanders’ actions reflect the image of the organization, public affairs officers in this research suggest the support they receive from others throughout the organization also hinges on the support provided by the top commanders. For example, when a base commander supported public affairs activities, practitioners found more cooperation from the subordinate commanders. However, the participants tended to rely on scenarios in which the responsibility for the success of public affairs tended to rest with the top commanders. This suggests the public affairs officers are relying on the authority transferred to them as opposed to garnering support from and developing relationships with internal publics.

Also closely related to the influence management is the practitioners’ emphasis on ensuring the commander is happy with their efforts. While it is understandable that the officers would be concerned with the satisfaction of their bosses, the potential of public affairs programs could be limited if the goal is “making the general happy,” rather than advocating what is best for the organization. The desire to make the boss happy could affect the ability of the practitioners to balance what a commander wants with what that commander needs. The result appears to indicate the value the organization places on the public affairs function is typically higher when a top-down pushing of public affairs occurs, rather than a practitioner’s own relationship and coalition building efforts.

While there was some mention of building relationships, the primary function of a public affairs officer was described as mostly communication. Further, the participants were undoubtedly more concerned with their commanders than with any of the organization’s other key publics. Since the participants measured their success largely by

how satisfied their commanders were, little discussion emerged about the perceived overall effectiveness of accomplishing the public affairs mission.

Air Force public affairs officers interviewed for this research viewed themselves as separate from the public relations practice, though both entities share many related communication and relationship functions. From an education perspective, participants in this study viewed their communication education as vital to success in their practice. Those with public relations specific education indicated what they learned was helpful, but their responses to the researcher's questions did not appear to be much different than those who did not have the coursework.

The long-term impact of practitioners wrestling with challenges presented by some organizations could be a sign of a potential dissatisfaction with the career field. While the participants in this study did not say they were dissatisfied with their jobs, the researcher suggests that it could be challenging to maintain a positive outlook with the lack of appreciation for what practitioners do.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore how Air Force public affairs officers view themselves in the larger context of public relations with respect to their education, training and role in the organization. Since this study was limited to a sample of practitioners it is not intended to be generalizable. However, the findings indicate the perceptions of these individuals participating in this study provided insight into issues they face. Additionally, the researcher suggests the findings provide a starting point for further exploration of the themes presented in the previous chapter.

Based on the themes that emerged in this research, further studies should be conducted to explore the perceptions of other Air Force members about the public affairs

field. The results could provide insight as to why some public affairs officers perceive they are sometimes thought of as a nuisance or necessary evil. Also, research on perceptions of key external publics, such as media and community members, could provide more insight into the application of public relations principles by public affairs practitioners.

On-the-job training, which was valued most by participants in this study, is a topic ripe for further exploration. The participants' emphasis on the value of that training has implications for Hunt's (1980) suggestion that on-the-job training is only suitable for jobs that require "little skill" (p. 303). This suggests, perhaps, that perception of the value of on-the-job training is not widely appreciated if one assumes public relations is a job of significant skill.

Further research is also needed on the job satisfaction of military practitioners. Through qualitative or quantitative methods, research should explore potential effects of the challenges facing public affairs officers and how those effects impact decisions to continue in military service or to seek employment in the civilian sector. The participants' responses revealed some of the challenges public affairs officers face. Taking those challenges into account, further research is needed to advance the understanding of public affairs officers in the Air Force and other military services.

Despite the similar functions of public affairs officers and public relations practitioners, this research has revealed issues that could be unique to military organizations, such as the effects of authority on a practitioner's ability to do the job. Thus, more research focusing specifically on military practitioners is appropriate. Additionally, research on civilian public relations practitioners' job satisfaction could

reveal whether the struggle for acceptance is a threat to retaining those in the practice today. If other public relations practitioners are facing the same type of challenges the participants in this study revealed, the field might be in need of an examination of the morale of practitioners in a broader perspective.

Finally, research on practitioners in specialized parts of public relations is somewhat limited. More research should be focused on how the practice of public relations varies depending on the type of organization and how the organization's culture defines and supports the practitioner's role. To use this study as an example, one should realize public relations education might be of greater value when practitioners work in an environment conducive to applying the practical skills and theoretical perspective one acquires through undergraduate and graduate studies. That education might be of less value if practitioners are not allowed to fully implement learned tactics and strategies. Perhaps if all practitioners were measured by one standard of practice, the results would be out of context if they did not meet the expectations of their employers. Considering the limitations imposed by employers, future research could be of help to the practitioners facing environments that require adaptation or aberrations from any real or implied standard of education and practice.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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